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Defense Week Interview With Rep. Les Aspin

'We Have To Get A Lot More Scared Than We Are...'

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An easy informality, the kind of bookish disorderliness one would expect from an academic, surrounds Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) in his Capitol Hill office. A shaggy grey and white dog named Junket greets visitors and lingers for a scratch behind the ears. Aspin used to say that she was his only Congressional junket. After taking a trip to China he abandoned the pun, although not the dog. In his office, Aspin leans back perilously in his chair causing visitors to fear for the large mirror that tilts, unhung, against the wall behind him.

The sense that this is the office of a genteel and somewhat rumpled professor is no accident. More so than most members of Congress, Aspin is acquainted with the world of ideas. After graduating with honors from Yale in 1960, he received a Master of Arts from Oxford in 1962 and, in 1965, a Ph.D. in economics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Before his election to Congress in 1970, he was an economics professor at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

He was an aide to William Proxmire, the unorthodox senior Senator from Wisconsin, from 1960 to 1962 and a staff assistant to chairman Walter Heller of the President's Council of Economic Advisors in 1963. In 1964 he ran Proxmire's reelection campaign. During Army service from 1966 to 1968, Aspin served as an aide to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. He won election to the House at age 31.

As a member of Congress, Aspin has gained influence in his chosen area of expertise—military affairs— out of proportion to his seniority. After obtaining a seat on the Armed Services Committee, he quickly moved to use the only weapons available to a junior member trying to buck the leadership—the press release and the floor of the House. Aspin quickly discovered that reporters have an endless appetite for stories about Pentagon mismanagement and waste, especially when, upon investigation, most of them turn out to be true. He quickly developed a reputation as an accurate and trenchant critic of bloated defense budgets at a time when defense spending was less popular than it may be today.

His releases, usually mailed out on Friday to catch the Monday morning editions, often present a well-researched alternative to the standard line offered by Administration spokesmen. When the Carter Administration was overwhelmed by more than 100,000 Cuban refugees last month, Aspin revealed [illegible] been taken by surprise. The CIA had predicted the exodus months in advance. In response to the cries of alarm about the Soviet gains in missile technology, which are used to bolster arguments for the $50 billion MX missile system, Aspin's release (given significant play in last Monday morning's dailies) said that U.S. improvements in numbers and sophistication of missiles outweigh those of the Russians.

On the floor, Aspin has taken on the leadership and won. In 1973, he succeeded in cutting almost $1 billion from the defense budget over the opposition of Armed Services Committee Chairman Edward Hebert. When the Watergate class of 1974 arrived on Capitol Hill and began to flex its muscles, Aspin was among those who plotted the ouster of the autocratic Hebert and his replacement by Rep. Melvin Price (D-Ill.)

As military spending has become more popular, Aspin's guerrilla attacks against the Pentagon have lost some of their sting. In addition, age and experience have changed Aspin. He is now a bit more conservative than during his early years in the House. Richard Barnard and Ken Maize of *Defense Week* talked with Aspin recently about his current views on defense policy.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish in your work in the intelligence field? Should there be a new charter for the CIA?

A. That is possible, but the main issue is: how good is your intelligence? Are there things you can do to make it better? I don't know the answers yet. I am in the midst of a whole set of hearings on these questions.

Q. Has the CIA been handcuffed and, if so, has this resulted in poor intelligence?

A. Intelligence has nothing to do with whether the agencies were handcuffed or not. The handcuffing applied to their covert operations and a few invasions of privacy in this country. But in terms of foreign intelligence—which is what you hope that the CIA and the intelligence community in general is going to provide for you—nothing was ever done about that. It wasn't even examined much. The Pike committee focused on constitutional abuses.

Q. How do you assess the quality of intelligence?

A. You need a benchmark in order to judge. An event is either predicted to happen or not happen, and it does or it doesn't. Other ways? We know, for example, at any one time, with a very high degree of accuracy, how many missiles the Soviets have. And we project that ten years [illegible] After ten years, you can see how